

REUTERS  
2 February 1987

HEADLINE: CIA'S NEW SPY MASTER MADE HIS MARK BEHIND A DESK

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A DATELINE: WASHINGTON, Feb 2

America's new master spy, Robert Gates, rose to be nominated CIA director through deskwork rather than cloak-and-dagger exploits.

Gates, 43, named by the White House today to replace the ailing William Casey, made his mark at the agency as a skilled administrator and analyst of data gathered by others, and was never a secret agent like many of his predecessors, intelligence experts say.

Casey, who is suffering from brain cancer, was drawn into the world of secret intelligence as an operative during World War II, when he sent spies into Nazi Germany for the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the CIA's predecessor.

Other former CIA directors -- including William Colby, Richard Helms, and Allen Dulles -- also had worked in the field as secret agents or spymasters.

Gates' career as an intelligence analyst has been less dramatic, but no less important, according to experts on intelligence who say the interpretation of secret information can make the difference between success and failure in a nation's foreign policy.

Gates has been awarded the the CIA's intelligence medal of merit for outstanding service.

A retired CIA official, who spoke on condition that he not be identified, termed Gates "an operational neophyte -- a bureaucrat, not an operator."

He said Gates appointment could mean the CIA was in for a period of "very quiet inactivity in intelligence operations" until a new president took office in 1989, when he could be expected to name his own CIA director.

Casey had enjoyed easy access to his president, which is important to being an effective CIA chief, the retired intelligence man said. Gates could not be expected to have the same access as did Casey, a close friend and former campaign manager of President Reagan.

While serving last year as the CIA's highest-ranking intelligence analyst, Gates objected to a White House plan to share intelligence with Iran, arguing it could tip the balance in its six-year-old war with Iraq and damage U.S. interests, according to a congressional report quoted in the New York Times last month.

The report said that when the intelligence sharing plan went ahead anyway -- evidently as part of a larger scheme to sell arms to Tehran in hopes that American hostages held by pro-Iran groups in Lebanon would be released -- Gates provided data "least likely to give the Iranians a significant advantage."

The CIA's role in the Iran arms deal has been the subject of investigation by congressional committees. Casey was a prime witness on Capitol Hill before he was stricken last December.

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The agency acted as an intermediary in the transfer of weapons to Iran and has also been linked to a secret Swiss bank account used in the diversion of profits to U.S.-backed Nicaraguan rebels known as contras.

According to a Senate Intelligence Committee report made public last week, Gates told investigators he was informed of the possible fund diversion by a CIA analyst on Oct. 1, 1986 -- almost two months before the diversion was made public by Attorney General Edwin Meese on Nov. 25.

Gates and Casey told the intelligence panel they voiced their concern to National Security Adviser John Poindexter, who resigned on Nov. 25 because of the fund diversion, but did not launch their own inquiry.

The Iran-contra affair has become Reagan's greatest political crisis, sending his popularity into a dive.

Gates, who joined the CIA in 1966, was elevated last year to the No. 2 spot at the agency and took over as acting director when Casey was overcome by seizures caused by his brain cancer.

Gates rose rapidly after entering the agency and was assigned in 1974 to a tour on the staff of the White House National Security Council, returning six years later to work in the agency's Langley, Va., headquarters.

He was soon responsible for evaluating intelligence about the Soviet Union and for the National Intelligence Daily, a secret report distributed six days a week to about 200 elite government officials with a security clearance of top secret or higher.

In a 1984 article in the Washington Post, Gates defended the agency against charges that its intelligence evaluations had been distorted for political reasons to exaggerate the Marxist threat in Latin America.

A year later, he told Congress the CIA estimated that Soviet military spending was growing at a much slower rate than the Pentagon believed.

Gates, a native of Kansas, holds a doctorate in Russian language and Soviet history from Georgetown University in Washington.

He and his wife, Becky, have two children.